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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews major trends in methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of organizations since the mid-sixties and espouses the political analysis of organizations, a position representing a middle ground between comparative structuralism and the loosely coupled systems approach. This position emphasizes micropolitics as well as macroinstitutional analysis and incorporates the elements of structure, cognition, and action, thereby taking into account both structural constraints on individual actors within organizations and the actors' voluntarism. According to this perspective, educational organizations are conceived of as political systems within which participants are political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies. The primary arena of political conflict is the decision-making process; because the ability of the individual or group to have its interests represented is limited, coalitions emerge. Educational organizations are approached dialectically, through a historical perspective and in terms of the specificity and structure of the institutional system of which they are part. Two methodological implications are that the unit of analysis of educational organizations as political entities is the group, and that the case study and the large quantitative comparative study provide complementary information on which aspects of school districts are unique and which are quantitatively recurrent. (MJL)

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NOTES ON A POLITICAL THEORY OF EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

by

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In: Consensus and Power in School Organizations

There was a shift in methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of organizations in the mid to late sixties. Methodologically, the emergence of multivariate analysis and statistical packages allowed social scientists to deal with larger bodies of data, and for the most part the previously predominant case study approach was left behind. Theoretically, the concern shifted away from an examination of the dynamics of organizations, i.e., strategy and change, toward a relatively static analysis of the structure of organizations. Thus in the 1960's and 1970's, the sociological study of organizations was dominated by the comparative structural perspective (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971; Hage and Aiken, 1967; Pugh et. al., 1963, 1968, etc.). The comparative-structural perspective emerged as a response to the earlier detailed case study approaches exemplified by Selznick (1949) and Gouldner (1954). While the case studies were concerned with how the behavior of organizations and their members idiosyncratically varied from a common theoretical reference point, i.e., Weber's model of bureaucracy, the comparative structuralists were primarily concerned with discovering common patterns across organizations.

An argument can be made that in its basic concern with the collection of large quantifiable data-banks, the comparative-structuralist reduced theory to the position of a legitimizer of methods rather than holding that methods are a tool of theory. The selective use of works of Max Weber exemplifies this phenomenon. Weber's ideal construct of bureaucracy emerged as a series of testable propositions while it was clearly never meant to do so (Hall and Tittle, 1966; Hall, 1963). Furthermore, Weber himself was cast as an aggregate structuralist who viewed organizations as based on the functional interdependence between various structures, e.g., size and differentiation (Blau and Schoenherr, 1971). The dynamic aspects

of the Weberian perspective, viewing structure as contingent on historical and cultural setting and as determined by the conscious action of particular interest groups, was for the most part ignored by the comparative structuralists. Contemporary theoretical perspectives (March and Simon, 1958; Cyert and March, 1963; Thompson, 1967) were also selectively used by the comparative structuralists. The references made to these theoretical works ignored, for the most part, the dynamic aspects of the perspectives. For example, not until recently has the theme of coalitions and coalition behavior been viewed as integral to the empirical research while it is obviously of import to the theoretical volumes (Cyert and March, 1963; Thompson, 1967).

The rise of the comparative structuralist perspective may be due in part to its affinity with one of the primary tendencies of organizational behavior: the development of general, overarching theories with applicability to all organizations. The statistical analysis employed by the comparative structuralists are well suited to the development of general theory. Even the earlier case study tradition tended to lose sight of the specifics of the empirical referents on which they were based, with emergent theoretical generalizations coming to the forefront. The comparative structuralists offered a more expilcit and direct route to the same end, while sacrificing a significant degree of realism and practicality in the process.

Although not as extreme, this interplay between theory and methods is also apparent in educational administration. Through most of its history, educational administration has placed a heavy emphasis on practice. As a result, those in educational administration have tended to rely on detailed empirical descriptions of educational systems rather than the development of broad theories of organizations. There has been a heavy use

of case studies or other intensive research techniques which tend to reveal the more idiosyncratic and dynamic aspects of school systems. One consequence of this has been the consistent lament among those in educational administration concerning the lack of theory (e.g., Cunningham, Hack and Nystrand, 1977; Immegart and Boyd, 1979; Boyan, 1981). There has been a call for the use of more refined methodological and statistical approaches to aid in the development of a more specific and quantified theory of educational administration.

The uncritical adoption of such an apprcach would have the same costs for the study educational administration that the rise of the comparative structuralist perspective did for the study of organizations. The work of Bidwell and Kasarda (1975) most closely approximates the structural model and provides a good example of these costs. Like many other structuralists, Bidwell and Kasarda view schools and school districts* in terms of the economic context and morphological structure of these organizations. For example, organizational attributes are measured in terms of such dimensions as pupil/teacher ratio, administrative intensity, ratio of professional support staff to classroom teachers, and staff qualifications. Their analysis essentially consists of examining how these four "organizational attributes" moderate the impact of environmental conditions such as school district size, fiscal resources, percent of disadvantaged families, district population educational levels, and percent non-white in district on measures of student achievement. Like most organizational theorists they view organizations as an input/output system. However, like most aggregate structuralists, (e.g., Blau and Schoenherr, 1970), they leave

* While Bidwell and Kasarda use school districts as the unit of analysis, the implication of their perspective holds for schools and school districts.

the process by which actors translate the impact of the environment unspecified. The environment's impact on structure is never viewed as mediated by the cognitions and calculative behavior of organizational actors. Environment is somehow transformed into structure, yet the process of transformation remains unspecified. Conscious actors, stratetic decision-making, and open conflict are never considered. The discovery of static patterns occurs at the expense of the dynamics of practical reality. While this approach may produce a theory of educational administration, there is a distinct possibility that such a theory would be too far removed from the practice of educational administration to be of much use.

Obviously there is a need in both organizational behavior and educational administration for the generation of practical theory (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981a). The development of practical theory requires that attention be paid to the common patterns that exist across organizations and the idiosyncratic realities of specific organizations. In recent years the structural perspective has come under attack from a variety of theoretical perspectives, (Karpick, 1972a, Georgiou, 1973; Goldman and Van Houten, 1977; McNeil, 1978; Salaman, 1978; Bacharach and Lawler, 1980; Crozier and Friedberg, 1981; Weick, 1976). Curiously, there appears to be little interest in defending this approach to the study of organizations, with the consequence that there has been considerable experimentation with alternative perspectives such as the negotiated order perspective (Strauss, 1978); the Marxian perspective (Benson, 1977; Braverman, 1971; Heydebrand, 1977; Goldman and Van Houten, 1977); the ethnomethodological perspective (Manning, 1977); a renewed interest in the social action perspectives (Rose, 1974; Goldthorpe, 1968; Silverman, 1970; Touraine, 1971) and the political perspective (Pettigrew, 1973; Bacharach and Lawler, 1980;

Pfeffer, 1980; Weiss, 1981).

Among the more potent critiques of the comparative structuralist perspective is March and Simon's (1958) notion of the loose coupling of organizations, recently elaborated by Weick (1976). What makes this perspective of particular interest is the fact that it represents an attempt by an organizational theorist to deal with the particular properties of educational organizations. In essence, the notion of loosely coupled systems characterizes organizations in a manner directly opposite that of comparative structuralist theory. Thus the objective focus on structure is replaced by a concern with the subjective aspects of cognition. As a consequence, the assumption of organizations as holistic or homogeneous gives way to a view of organizations as heterogeneous. Harmony is usurped by chaos. However, it is precisely at this point that the weaknesses of the loosely coupled metaphor becomes most apparent. Possible sources of order are left vague and unspecified. While Weick (1976) lists some possible mechanisms through which coupling may occur (e.g., authority, technology), it is not apparent at what point coupling occurs. Further, it is not apparent whether coupling occurs between individuals, groups, or organizations. Indeed, one of the primary problems with the loosely coupled systems approach is the fact that it is based on an individual phenomenological analysis, yet it is applied haphazardly to organizations as a unit.

Implicit in one or more of the aforementioned perspectives are a number of critiques of the comparative-structural approach to the study of organizations:

a. Comparative structuralists have reified organizations

b. Comparative structuralists have anthropomorphized organizations

c. Comparative structuralists have objectified organizations

d. Comparative structuralists have viewed individual organizational members as passive

e. Comparative structuralists have viewed organizational structures as constraining behavior rather than as emergent from behavior

f. Comparative structuralists have assumed the existence of an aggregate organizational reality

g. Comparative structuralists have ignored divergence in subgroup and individual cognitions and interests

h. Comparative structuralists have failed to explain the dynamics of change and conflict in organizations.

What most of the critiques of the comparative structuralists have in common is a primary concern with the analysis of organizational dynamics and organizational change. They view organizations as systems of actions. Not coincidently, their development has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the use of "qualitative" methods (ASQ, 1981). The problem with the various critiques offered of the comparative structuralists is that no one perspective has addressed all the points of criticism, nor have they shown an appreciation for the positive aspects of the structural approach. To that end, we have yet to see a theoretical perspective which deals with what must be viewed as the three critical issues of organizational theory:

a. How do organizational structures and processes emerge from the behavior and cognitions of individual actors?

b. How do organizational structures and processes stabilize without inhibiting the behaviors and cognitions of individual actors?

c. How do organizations change without being reduced to chaos? Specifically, how do organizations change while still maintaining their organizational identity?

To a large degree what Weick (1976) and others have failed to emphasize is that beyond the facade of loose coupling, there may exist the day-to-day calculative workings of a political reality. That is, at times one has the sense that the proponents of the loosely coupled are trapped by their own metaphor, failing to realize that what appears as loose coupling may indeed be the informal but highly predictable politics of organizational life. Indeed, the modes of coupling may be based on calculative decisions constrained by the structure and environmental content of organizations. While the structuralists fail to consider the internal dynamics of organizations, the adherents of the loosely coupled systems approach fail to consider the structural constraints that impinge on the individual actor's cognitions and actions.

It is my premise that a middle ground between the comparative structuralist and the loosely coupled systems approaches may be found in the political analysis of organizations. Unlike the political perspective offered by Marxists, I believe it is critical to emphasize not simply macro institutional analysis, but the analysis of micro politics (Pfeffer, 1979; Bacharach and Lawler, 1980). To the degree that a political analysis examines the cognitions and actions of actors within the context of specific organizational structure and environment, it may be seen as incorporating the strengths of both the structuralist and loosely coupled system approaches while not succumbing to the weaknesses of these approaches. That is, a political perspective incorporates structure, cognition, and action and as such, takes into account the structural constraints of an approach like Bidwell and Kasarda and the voluntarism implicit in a

perspective such as Weick's.

The image of school organizations as political entities is not new. Indeed, an argument can be made that in the educational administration literature this has been a prevailing perspective (Charters, 1952; Eliot, 1959; Corwin, 1965; Ziegler and Jennings, 1974; Wirt and Kirst, 1972; Thompson, 1976). This perception of an existing political orientation stems, to a significant degree, from the use of detailed case studies and other intensive, descriptive methods in educational administration noted earlier. Most of these theorists, while offering an insight into the political analysis of organizations, fail to develop the conceptions of schools as complex political organizations. That is, for the most part, they concentrated on selective relationships such as the relationship between the superintendent and the school board (e.g., Ziegler and Jennings), or they concentrated on specific political roles such as the role of superintendent, (Iannacconi and Lutz, 1970). Perhaps the most thoroughly developed analysis of schools as complex political organizations is that offered by Corwin. By identifying key actors and their interactions, in developing a differentiated view of the organizational environment, and by emphasizing the notion of bargaining and adaptive strategies, Corwin has taken an important preliminary step towards developing a political model of the school system and its environment that is more comprehensive in its scope than most earlier efforts.

Considering that the works of Corwin, Charters, Eliot, etc. preceded theorists such as Bidwell and Kasarda, Weick, and Meyer and Rowan (1977), it is astonishing that the political perspective offered by students of educational systems has not been thoroughly incorporated in the analysis of educational organizations. In a sense, it is ironic that I propose

a political approach to the study of educational institutions as a middle ground between structuralist and loosely coupled systems approaches.

A detailed analysis of schools and school districts suggests a political image of organizations accounting for the following:

a. Educational organizations are best conceived as political systems, both internally and in their external relationships. In educational organizations, at all levels, constant tactical power struggles occur in an effort to obtain control over real or symbolic resources. Whether this struggles occurs between the superintendent and the school board, between the school board and the state, or between principals and teachers is not the important consideration. It is essential to accept the dynamics of power struggles over resources as integral to any organizational analysis.

b. In educational organizations, participants can be conceived of as political actors with their own needs, objectives, and strategies to achieve those objectives. While there may be some apparent consensus regarding the normative goals of educational organizations, e.g., education, the weight given to different subgoals and the strategies used to pursue them will differ depending upon which actors are questioned. For example, a decision to cut an administrator of an affirmative action program may be viewed by the community as a serious threat to minority protections calling for public protest at school board meetings or letters to the editor of the local paper. The same issue may be coded as a budgetary necessity by the school board. Similarly, in discussions of class size, one finds administrators mentioning financial and child population statistics while teachers speak of pedagogical technique. Thus each group may argue not only the "rightness" of its specific position, but will also define the issue in terms of its own function.

c. The decision-making process is the primary arena of political conflict. Each subgroup can be expected to approach a decision with the objective of

maximizing its specific interests or goals rather than the maximization of some general organizational objective. For example, in a choice between purchasing new school buses and multiplying the trips of current buses by staggering students arrival and leaving times, citizens may be concerned with such things as the general traffic patterns in the community, costs, and students being out of school until mid-morning and arriving home after dark. For its part, the school board may be strongly committed to a staggered schedule because it believes that the costs of increased driver time and mechanical depreciation is significantly less expensive than would be the purchase of new buses and the subsequent need to hire more drivers. School administrators may be concerned with questions of congestion around the buildings and the disruption of classes as students arrive and depart. Teachers, as a group, may be entirely disinterested and attempt not to participate. Unless some aspect of the question involves their self-interest (e.g., a significant increase in the transportation budget will decrease the monies available for salaries), teachers, or any other group, may decide not to become involved in a specific decision. For those who perceive an issue as related to their self-interest, however, the decision-making process becomes the arena in which to attempt to insure that the decision outcome reflects their self-interests.

d. Each subgroup will also have a different view of who has the formal power (authority), who has the informal power (influence), or who should have the power to make organizational decisions. A group's efforts to have their point of view relfected in the decision outcome centers in large part around questions of authority and influence. In order to have one's viewpoint represented requires that others agree that your view should be considered, i.e., that you should have influence over the decision. The level of agreement or congruence between parties over who has or should have authority and influence

over various decisions is constrained by the structure of educational organizations, their work processes, and the different goals of groups. In regards to congruence, four types of conditions can be considered (Bacharach and Lawler, 1980):

1. Congruence (Legitimate Authority)

a) Centralized: superiors and subordinates concur that the right to make a final decision belongs to only the superior.

b) Decentralized: superiors and subordinates concur that subordinates have the right to make final decisions.

2. Incongruence

a) Shirking: superiors maintain that subordinates have the right to make final decisions but subordinates refuse to do so.

b) Usurpation: superiors maintain that subordinates do not have the right to make final decisions, but subordinates maintain that they do have the right to make final decisions.

e. Given the importance of the decision-making process and groups' efforts to have their views reflected in decision outcomes, the nature of congruence with regard to where power lies in the decision-making process is consequential for the level of conflict and ultimately for educational quality. Obviously, the two congruent conditions will produce the least conflict and will enable decision-making to proceed as necessary. In contrast, the two incongruent conditions both pose a major threat to the integrity of the decision-making process. In one (shirking), efforts will be made to pass responsibility for the decision on to others. The passing of a sensitive issue such as school closings back and forth between the administration and the school board would be an illustration of this. In the other incongruent condition (usurpation), a groups efforts to obtain authority or influence over a

decision which others feel they are not entitled to may also stall the decision process. For example, if teachers, administration, the school board, and various community groups all attempted to become involved in a particular decision the likelihood of conflict is high and the chances for a speedy decision low. Disruption of the decision process, particularly when important educational issues are involved, will have a direct affect on the school district's program.

f. The ability of a single individual or group to have its interests represented in the decision-making process is often limited. As a consequence, in educational organizations coalitions of actors emerge, identify collective objectives, and devise strategies to achieve those objectives. For example, the power of individual teachers or groups of teachers is limited, but the power of a coalition of teachers, i.e., the union, is often substantial. Should the teachers' union elicit the support of the PTA an even more influential coalition could result. The formation of coalitions is constrained by organizational structures, ideologies, and environment. For example, the type of coalitions that emerge and the strategies which they follow will depend greatly on whether we are dealing with a large, highly bureaucratic school district or a small, non-bureaucratic school district; whether the community is liberal or conservative; or whether the district population is well educated or poorly educated. In other words, the coalitions which emerge, the collective objectives which they identify, and the strategies which they use to achieve these objectives will be determined to a large degree by the various combinations of structures, ideologies, and environment.

g. In any school district, there are likely to be a number of different coalitions either in existence or capable of being formed. The dominant coalition is that coalition of actors which controls the authority structure and resources of the organization at a given point in time; their actions and

orientations can be described in terms of their logiques d'action (perspective from the point of view of the observer that gives their actions meaning and coherence). For example, in one school district we observed (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b), the superintendent and a majority faction of the school board constituted the dominant coalition in the district. Although challenged by other groups such as the teachers and the minority faction of the school board, there was no single group or coalition of groups with sufficient influence to replace the dominant coalition in the district. This coalition had enough power through the superintendent's control over his administration and the majority factions control over school board votes to insure the district was run as they saw fit. Further, the strategies and tactics employed (such as the superintendent's control over information and the majority factions ties to the community elite) were consistent with their perception of their roles and responsibilities as school district officials in a particular school district. In a similar manner, those who challenged the dominant coalition also followed a consistent set of rules or expectations. As a consequence, there was an underlying logic to what often appeared to be a chaotic and conflictual state of affairs. The same reasoning can be applied to all school districts.

h. Although a dominant coalition may remain in place for an extended period of time either through astute political manuvering or the relative quiescence of the district, no coalition is sacrosanct. A dialectical relationship exists between the organizational structures, ideologies, and environment and the emergence and aspirations of coalitions. Coalitions emerge in reaction to structures, ideologies, and environment and in turn reformulate and institutionalize structures, work processes, and ideologies which engender over time, a reaction from emergent coalitions. The rotation of coalitions on school boards illustrates this process. In one district we observed

(Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b), a taxpayer's group concerned over rising school costs was able to mobilize sufficient community support to gain a majority of seats on the school board. This coalition was able to oust the superintendent from office, alter the content and definition of other administrative roles, and to undertake a review of the district curriculum with an eye toward adapting a more fundamental or back-to-basics approach to education. Shocked by some of these actions, a rival coalition consisting of teachers, parent groups, and members of the community elite was formed and after intensive compaigning, was able to replace the taxpayer's group as the majority faction the school board. This new coalition then proceeded to implement a series of its own changes in school district policy. The point is that educational organizations must be seen as political entities that shape and are shaped by their environmental and organizational context.

i. The dialectic presented above as a critical component of a political analysis of schools occurs over time and within a specific context. This means that educational organizations are best understood in terms of a historical perspective and in terms of the specificity and structure of the institutional system of which they are a part.

At least two methodological issues emerge from this elaboration of the major points involved in an analysis of educational organizations as political entities. The first issue deals with the unit of analysis. A political analysis, due to its concentration on coalitions as the basis of action and change, envisions groups as the primary focus of a study of educational organizations. This perspective affords an empirical middle ground between a concentration on aggregate and individual data by examining collectivities of individuals within an organization. To date, the potential of the group

model has not been fully realized. The group has been seen as a relatively formal entity whose activities within the organization are passive and of little interest to the researcher. What attention has been paid to the group focuses on group autonomy, that is, with the group itself rather than the group's relationship with other work groups in the organization. Realization of the full potential of the group perspective requires that the dynamics of the group interrelationships become a focal point of future research. For example, properly conceptualized, a group model is well suited to an examination of the administrative, educational, and political imperatives that confront school administrators as they are expressed in various group interactions. We believe that the proper application of the group model can be achieved if it is embedded in a theoretical approach that considers the organization as a political system.

The second methodological issue has to deal with the use of case studies versus large quantitative comparative studies with which we began our discussion. There, we argued that the choice of method has in many cases dictated the theoretical content of the research undertaken. One of the advantages of the political approach being advocated here is its ability to constructively utilize both methods, drawing upon their strengths without succumbing to their limitations. To elaborate, the major strengths of a large scale comparative survey approach is the ability to generalize that it affords. It enables one to pinpoint the key variables and variable relationships which constrain the political process across school districts. Its primary weakness is its inability to provide a sense of process and the specific information necessary for an in-depth analysis. In contrast, the strengths of a case study approach lie in its ability to explore how political processes unfold over time in a specific setting. It's primary

weakness is its failure to provide a sufficient base for generalizing to other organizations. Together, the two methods complement one another and provide the basis for a thorough understanding of school districts as political systems, allowing one to determine which aspects of school districts are qualitatively unique, and which aspects are quantitatively recurrent.

Obviously, the key step here involves the creative design of research which can effectively utilize both approaches. For example, in our own research, we began a series of case studies to familiarize ourselves with how the issues we were concerned with were handled in school districts. The information collected from these case sites was then used to help in designing a survey for distribution to a larger sample of schools of which the case study sites were a part. Having collected data using both approaches, it is now possible to use the results of the case studies to suggest potential analyses of the survey data, or to use the results of a survey analysis to characterize a case study site and examine how a given profile of variable values is translated into action in an actual school district (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981b). Other ways of interfacing the two types of data are also possible. The point is that drawing on the strengths of each approach insures that the results will both be abstract enough to allow for significant theoretical contributions, yet concrete enough to generate practical policy recommendations.

In closing, as I noted elsewhere, the interplay between theory, methods, and practice may arise in any area, and the difference in emphasis which characterizes organizational theory and educational administration as areas of activity has direct consequences for the establishment of a dialogue between these two fields (Bacharach and Mitchell, 1981a). The purpose of such an

interaction is to insure that the theory that is generated is relevant and useful both to those in educational administration and in organizational behavior. For educational administration, this suggests a critical assessment of the concepts being proposed by organizational behaviorists; for organizational behaviorists, this prompts a step down from the heights of general theory and a focus on the specific properties of schools as well as a concern with how broader theoretical concepts unfold in educational settings. For both, the dialogue should be an exercise in the creation of practical theory. One example of the potential fruitfulness of this kind of a dialogue is in the political analysis of schools as organizations elaborated here (e.g., Bacharach and Mitchell, 1982). Recent theoretical developments in organizational behavior, when combined with the rich body of descriptive empirical literature in the areas of school politics and school organizations, results in a perspective which presents a realistic image of schools as organizations with direct implications for the development and refinement of theory, research, and practice.

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